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SUBJECT: LEBANON: AOUN WITH STAFFDEL CAMMACK -- WE'LL SEEK
NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. William K. Grant for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Opposition Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader Michel Aoun told visiting Senate Foreign Relations Committee staffer Perry Cammack that he believed the bilateral relationship between Lebanon and Syria was on the right path. However, finding a resolution to other regional issues, including the Arab-Israeli conflict and the fate of Palestinian refugees, was of greater concern to the stability of Lebanon.

2. (C) Aoun was confident that FPM candidates would be successful in the June 7 parliamentary elections in several predominantly Christian districts, while he was still negotiating with his ally, Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri's Amal party, over candidates in mixed Christian-Muslim districts. Aoun said FPM's relationship with its other ally, Hizballah, had improved following the December/January Gaza crisis. Aoun confirmed that his alliance, if successful, would seek a national unity government after the elections. He also outlined several challenges and priorities for the next government, including empowering the ministries and moving ahead with profit-generating projects to rebuild the Lebanese economy. End summary.

AOUN POSITIVE ON
SYRIA, OTHER REGIONAL
ISSUES MORE TROUBLING

3. (C) Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader Michel Aoun told visiting Senate Foreign Relations Committee staffer Perry Cammack, accompanied by the Ambassador and Poloffs, that he believed Syrian President Bashar Asad was "open-minded" and made positive signs about Syria's relationship with Lebanon. During his December 2008 visit to Syria, Aoun said he had good talks with Asad and noted that the speech Aoun made to university students was broadcast live on Syrian television, uncensored. Meeting Cammack at his residence on February 16, Aoun commented that if Lebanon had problems to solve, it was with "our adversaries, and not our friends."

4. (C) However, on other regional issues, Aoun was less positive. He said finding a comprehensive solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, Palestinian issues and water issues

were most important for the stability of Lebanon. Aoun feared that ongoing disputes, especially regarding the fate of Palestinian refugees, could not only destabilize Lebanon, but "completely change Lebanon's demography." Aoun implied that a demographic shift would be most detrimental to Lebanon's Christian population. Solving the Sheba'a Farms issue was a lesser problem, he said, because it was "only a piece of land."

FPM'S ELECTORAL
OUTLOOK

15. (C) Aoun was confident about the success of FPM's candidates for parliamentary seats in several predominantly-Christian districts, despite some disagreements with his ally, Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri's Amal party, to form candidate lists in certain districts for the June 7 parliamentary elections. Aoun said he was "not worried" about FPM candidates in the districts of Koura, Zgharta, Batroun, Jbeil (all mostly Christian), and in Baabda and West Bekaa-Rachaya (mixed Christian-Muslim) districts. In Jezzine, Aoun said he was still negotiating with Berri, while in the Metn, he said he would wait for local political powerhouse Michel Murr to "stop maneuvering" before he would react. As for the Armenian Tashnaq Party, Aoun said he believed Tashnaq was allied with him and not with Murr.

16. (C) When asked about the relationship between FPM and its other ally, Hizballah, Aoun replied that the 2006 MOU signed by the two parties was "the most important thing." He

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characterized Hizballah's decision not to interfere in the December/January Gaza crisis as a "plus for the relationship." Hizballah, he said, was smarter and easier to work with than majority leader Saad Hariri's March 14 coalition. He accused March 14 of having "hegemonic tendencies" and was only interested in power for itself. Meanwhile, he argued, Hizballah was interested in sharing power which enabled the two sides to sign a ten-point MOU in 2006, while still negotiating other issues of disagreement.

AOUN CALLS FOR NATIONAL
UNITY AND REFORM IN
THE NEXT GOVERNMENT

17. (C) Following the parliamentary elections, a national unity government would be a necessity, Aoun believed. If the March 8/Aoun alliance won the elections, it would pursue a national unity government with its March 14 opponents, he confirmed. However, he said it would be up to Hariri whether to participate.

18. (C) Aoun was critical of the current government, especially President Michel Sleiman, claiming it had few achievements to show for its seven months in office. For the next government, Aoun outlined several priorities for reform, including revitalizing the power of the ministries and deconflicting the role of the Council of Ministers (the cabinet) and the Parliament. Aoun said he would also support moving forward with proposed infrastructure development and profit-generating projects to revitalize the economy, such as the building of dams, improving the electrical grid, and revitalizing now-defunct oil refineries.

19. (C) Another challenge for the next government to deal with would be to create a "national system of defense" whereby Hizballah's fighters and weapons, as well as other militias and local people, would be integrated into the national security services. This would preserve "the resistance," but such a force would only be activated in a time of "occupation," he argued. Realistically, he said, this plan would require time because the "climate of confidence" between the political factions does not currently exist, but

should be an important goal.
GRANT